Archaeology of Ransom Place

An Examination of the California Street Excavations

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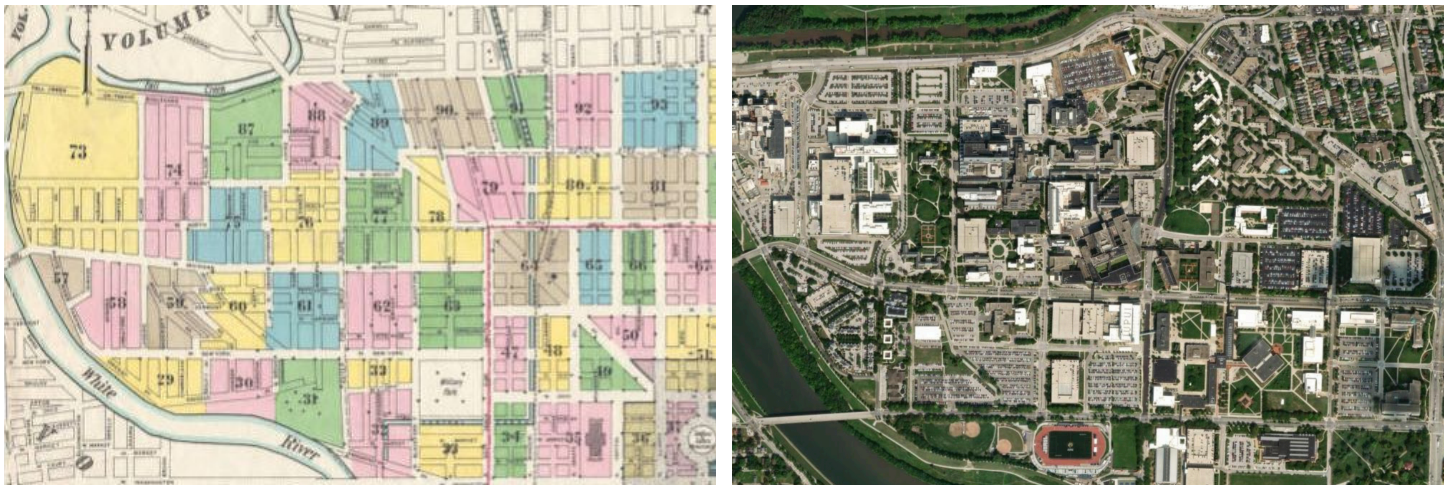
November 13, 2023

PART ONE - INTRODUCTION

Dr. Paul Mullins was a historic archaeologist and professor at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) who studied the intersectionality of racism, consumption, and urban development. His research focused on urban displacement within Indianapolis by examining how an African-American community was displaced on present-day IUPUI's campus. Dr. Mullins utilized a variety of tools in order to understand the places he was excavating including the use of Sanborn maps, along with the archaeological record, to deduce what buildings existed before the creation of IUPUI's expansive campus. The goal of his work was to use archaeological methods, as well as ethnographic interviews and documentary research, to bring light to Indianapolis' neighborhoods that have histories of class, cultural, religious, and racial inequalities.

Photo of Dr. Paul Mullins

The image below compares the basic structural organization of the west side of Indianapolis as it was seen in 1915 versus how it is seen today.



Sanborn Map of Indianapolis circa 1915 (Left); Google Satellite View of Indianapolis circa 2023 (Right)

What lies beneath the surface of Indianapolis' Near Westside?

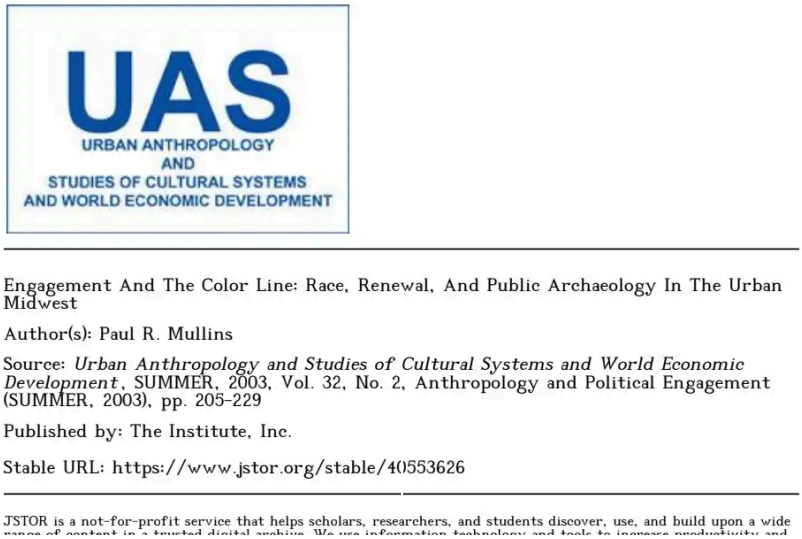
What can archaeology tell us about the lives of those who lived here and the history of the city's Near Westside? Dr. Mullins spent a decade investigating sites in the Ransom Place neighborhood

and on Indiana University's urban campus that displace its historically African-American residents.

Dr. Mullins, along with a group of anthropology field school students and representatives from the Ransom Place Neighborhood Association, excavated the California Street sites over the course of several seasons. Their work is documented in field notes, site forms, photographs, and artifact assemblage.

2004 IUPUI Archaeology Field School

This work was a community-based archaeological project and for more information, the article 'Engagement And The Color Line: Race, Renewal, And Public Archaeology In The Urban Midwest' by Dr. Paul Mullins will be linked below.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Engagement And The Color Line: Race, Renewal, And Public Archaeology In The Urban Midwest
Author(s): Paul R. Mullins
Source: Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development, SUMMER, 2003, Vol. 32, No. 2, Anthropology and Political Engagement (SUMMER, 2003), pp. 205-229
Published by: The Institute, Inc.
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40553626
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Engagement and the Color Line Article

A variety of archaeological material was recovered from these excavations including plates, bowls, jugs, coins, pots, and even a dog's skeletal remains.

Photo from Excavation Site 921-923.

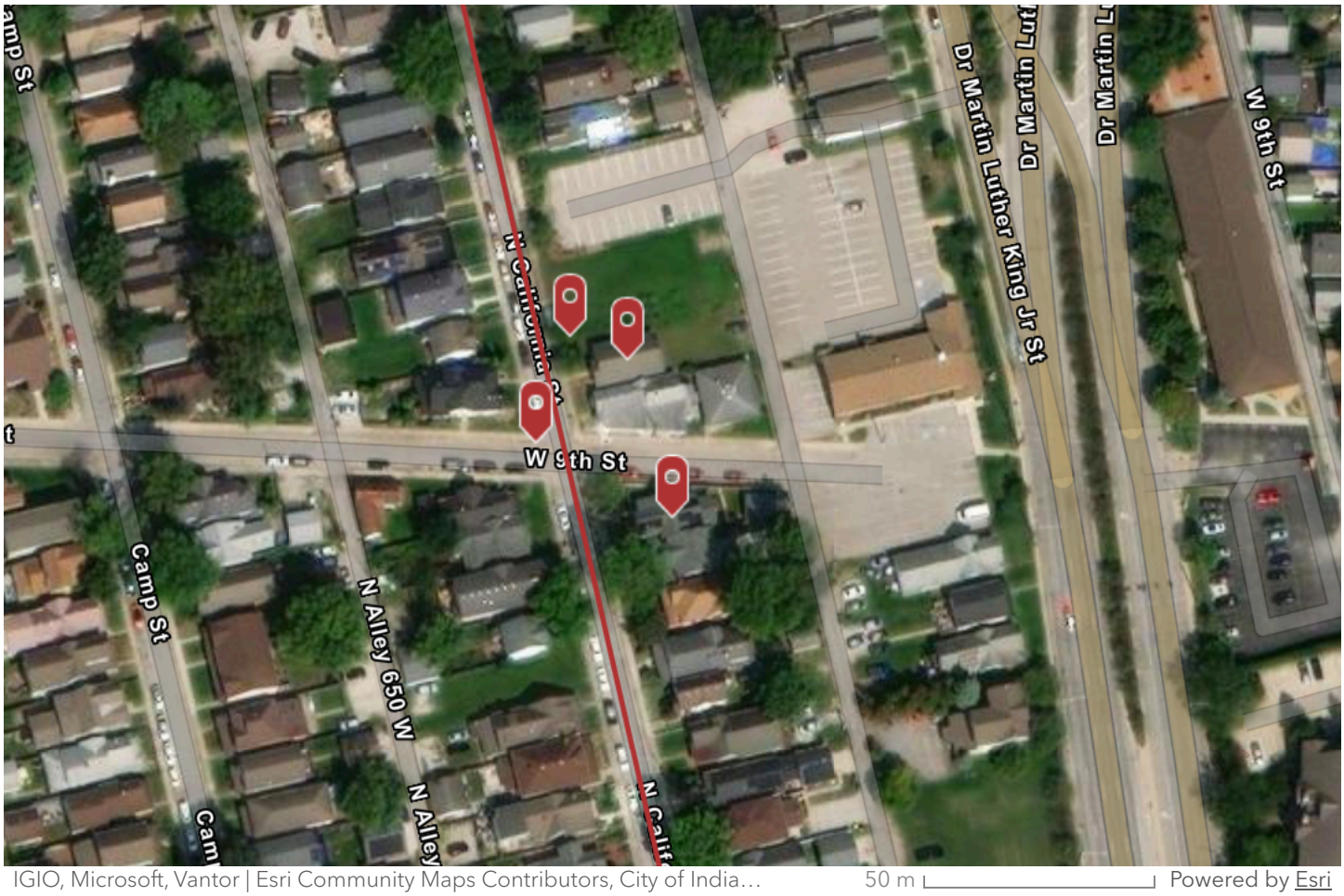
Excavating a site is just the first step in a long process. Students worked in the archaeology lab to wash, label, and

catalogue the artifacts, which were then entered into a database. Dr. Mullins and colleagues analyzed the artifacts and historical records and most importantly for community archaeology, interviewed elders and community leaders. Dr. Mullins published numerous articles and also created, with his colleague Dr. Susan Hyatt, the blog Invisible Indianapolis. It examines Indianapolis' often marginalized communities, and includes numerous posts about the Ransom Place and Indiana Avenue neighborhoods.

Invisible Indianapolis Blog

Of the various excavation sites, the California Street sites are the most expansive in terms of pure land area covered. The group of sites, dubbed the California Street sites due to their proximity to California Street, actually includes four different sites that were unearthed in 2002, and from 2004 to 2006. These sites, and the story that Dr. Mullins crafted around them, centrally focus on the neighborhood of Ransom Place, as well as its unique lens on the displacement of the people around them. In the following walking tour, we will guide you through the archaeological material and historical accounts of each of these individual sites, and along the way, we will begin to understand the material culture of the former residents that shaped the history of our city.

PART TWO - WALKING TOUR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North California Street

The plots of the California Street residences excavated between 2002 and 2006 all sit close together along modern North California Street where a residential neighborhood still exists today, but the community has gone through drastic changes from the 19th and 20th centuries up to now.

Image: Satellite Image of Ransom Place Neighborhood circa 2023; California Street

915-917 N California St

Site 890 is located in what is today 915-917 North California Street. The site was originally platted in 1871, and the houses in the lot appear to have been constructed between 1871 and 1880.

One of these houses was home to Mary Gaskil and her children, a white Hoosier listed in the census as a chair caner. In the 1880's, most of the California Street residents were white, the majority of whom were American-born.

In 1887, as seen from the Sanborn Map, the two modest and single-story frame houses were very much like all the other homes along the east side of California Street.

915-917 N California St

In 1900, the house at what is now 915 North California Street was hope to James and Harriet Smith and their children Luesettie and Everett. The family were renters; James was a farm laborer, Harriet a stay at home mother and Everett a mattress factory worker.

A decade later, the house was home to another family of renters, Richard and Bertha Cash. The 67 year old Richard was a building contractor and a Union Army veteran, and Bertha was an English immigrant.

"Like most homes in the near-Westside, the two houses at 915 and 917 were constantly being modified: most homes in the near-Westside were rather small, but they changed as children were born, guests or boarders arrived, and families needed more room to house their things" (Mullins 2002 "Field... June 1 Report").

915-917 N California St

Harry, also a soldier, and Jennie Miller lived in the lot north of 915, neighboring the Cashes. The Millers were a Black family, one of seven Black families on the 900 block which had thirteen households in total.

"Neighbor Ruben Jones at 917 North California was a laborer, wife Sallie was a laundress, daughter Julie was a cook, and daughters Justina and Mary were 'housegirls' working for private families. In 1910 many African Americans, Whites, and European immigrants were still living alongside each other. The double at 909-911 North California Street, for instance, included janitor Virgil Robison and wife Mamie in one side and public school teacher Arthur Long and wife Mary who was running a hairdressing business from their home in the 909 half of the double. The Longs were White, and the Robisons were Black: sharing a roof across the color line was

quite uncommon and would be unheard of in the next decade" (Mullins 2002 "915-917...").

915-917 N California St

By 1920, eleven of the thirteen houses in the 900 block were occupied by Black households. This marked a large scale demographic shift in the wider Ransom Place area over the four decades or so from when the houses at 915 and 917 were first constructed.

The house at 915 was torn down in the 60's, and the house at 917 in the mid-80's. The three homes to the south were torn down in the 80's as well.

847 N California St: The Ward Residence

“In 1919, physician Joseph H. Ward moved to the California Street home” (Wanzer 2005, 23) with his wife Zella. He had resided in the neighborhood before going to Europe for military service in World War One and was just returning. One of the most notable residences of the Ransom Place neighborhood, he was C.J. Walker's personal physician and was with her during her death in 1919.

He went on to run the city's only black hospital as well as serve as the "highest-ranking African-American Army officer in the Second World War" (Mullins 2006, 69).

847 N California St

The Wards, along with other proceeding residents of the lot in the 800 block of California, were of relative high-status, as were their neighbors, and they lived lifestyles that reflected this. The excavations around their home revealed "the yard surrounding the home lacked the usual artifacts associated with working class citizens. Missing were items such as straight pins, buttons, and other kitchen refuse that indicate a working class household. Instead, excavation uncovered an unusually clean yard with a very few incidental artifacts scattered throughout. The yard's landscape was an expression of wealth and social position" (Wanzer 2005, 5).

847 N California St

"Finding such a neighborhood
peopled by well-educated, affluent and utterly genteel African Americans posed a stark contrast to the assumption that such neighborhoods were exclusively white" (Mullins 2006, 69).

847 N California St

But racism was still evident even in the archaeological remains at the site. Alumaseal milk caps from the 1930's found at the site give insight into the segregation still practiced at the time in places around the city.

847 N California St

The Riverside Amusement Park, "a prominent local amusement park modeled on Coney Island... restricted access to whites; even in openly xenophobic Indianapolis, it was unusual to find such codified white exclusivity. Only once each year
did the park admit African Americans for its ‘Colored Frolic’ day, and to gain admission black patrons would bring a milk cap: consequently, this was known as ‘Milk Cap Day’ to African Americans." (Mullins 2006, 68).

847 N California St

Today, there is a historic marker in the front lawn of the property. The above sign indicates the home's current owners, the "Walter Theadford Family" who purchased the house in 1940 while the lower sign marks the site as a storefront in 1900. It says "Has served as grocery store, barbershop, cleaners and beauty parlor."

903-913 N California St

Fragments of a glass mug recovered from site 921. This mug, while practical, is also made of an translucent glass that catches the light. While many of the artifacts uncovered have a practical use, they, like the mug are also aesthetically pleasing. The lives of the residents of California Street went beyond them just surviving the daily demands of life; they valued beauty in everyday objects.

903-913 N California St

"At one point someone lived there and called that now vacant lot home. Based on these facts it is safe to assume that the remains uncovered could quite possibly have been someone's pet... Americans bury their pets not only for practical purposes, but because we hope to see them again" (Bryant, 2006).

The dog burial proves that California street was home to a thriving community that had their own daily lives. The collar signifies that this animal was a pet, and was cared for by its family. They had families, pets, loved, and grieved for what they lost. In additional to the faunal remains found during the course of these excavations, animals provided companionship to the residents, to the extent that they mourned their deaths. Similar to the mug, this dog burial proves how complex and rich the lives of past residents were. They not only had pets, but they also deeply mourned their loss, enough to bury them.

903-913 N California St

"Americans bury their pets not only for practical purposes, but because we hope to see them again” (Bryant, 2006)

One of the most dramatic artifacts from this excavation is the dog burial. There were other types of faunal remains uncovered at these sites, but those mainly reveal the consumption habits of past residents. The dog burial gives insight into not only the lives, but also the complex emotions many of these people experienced. The belief in an afterlife, as evidenced by the quote from Bryant, gives way into the possible religious beliefs of these residents. While it is difficult to determine the exact religious beliefs from a single burial, this dog does signify that by burying their beloved companion, there was hope that they would someday be reunited.

903-913 N California St

A “landmarks” of America coin that was recovered from site 921, showing that the residents of this street had connections to other locations in the country. While it is easy to think of the residents of these areas just in the context of Indianapolis, they had networks that extended far beyond the state. Whether this was through relatives or friends who lived in different areas, or traveled to these areas themselves, the lives of these people extended far beyond Indiana.

903-913 N California St

Excavations at the California street sites, which recovered the foundations of these homes. With these homes specifically, there were many different layers, which meant that the community kept on building on top of previous structures.

PART THREE - COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY

Throughout these excavations, Dr. Mullins utilized a form of engaged archaeology where the archaeologist hopes to rationalize and legitimize their work to a contemporary community (Little and Zimmerman, 2010). Additionally, Dr. Mullins went a step further by attempting to frame the research questions based on local community agendas and priorities. Beginning in the Summer of 2000, the cooperative project known as Ransom Place Archaeology successfully completed its first excavation and would continue to operate these semi-annual projects up until the Summer of 2009. Across its entirety, the combined effort of IUPUI's

anthropology department and the local Ransom Place Neighborhood Association successfully excavated over eight unique archaeological sites. According to their official website, embedded below, "the project uses archaeological excavations, oral historical research, and public interpretation to probe the complex confluence of African-American culture, business and consumption, and race and racism in Indiana's capital city."

Ransom Place Archaeology Website

Utilizing the combined effort of IUPUI's archaeological and historical analysis with the plethora of oral and written material recovered from residents of the neighborhood, Ransom Place Archaeology was able to unearth some of the complex history related to Indianapolis' black community. In particular, the celebration of this community and the restoration of its architecture are essential to the goals of the Ransom Place Neighborhood Association. In fact, the association is still active in community organization, cleanup, and restoration projects in and around the neighborhood.

Ransom Place Neighborhood Association Website

During a celebration of Dr. Mullins' life earlier this year, an abundance of former colleagues, students, and friends joined together to highlight the goodwill and benevolent qualities that Dr. Mullins possessed while attaining his never-ending goal of unearthing the forgotten. One of the speakers, Claudia Polley, a friend of Dr. Mullins and the daughter of Jean Spears, a former member and founder of the Ransom Place Neighborhood Association, discussed what Dr. Mullins and his research meant to the residents of Ransom Place.

Dr. Mullins' Celebration of Life Memorial on July 15, 2023

Historically, the residents of Ransom Place have mostly been non-white minorities, a majority of whom identify as African American. Additionally, the residents of Ransom Place are typically farther down the socioeconomic ladder and have been consistently discriminated against on the basis of race by both IUPUI's campus and the greater city of Indianapolis. For example, the historic district Ransom Place is located in, referred to as D25, has been consistently impacted by the processes of redlining, or the discriminatory practice that involves denying services to

people based on race or ethnicity. For more information on the processes involved with redlining and their impact on the city of Indianapolis please visit the website embedded below.

Mapping Inequality

In an interview with Dr. Mullins in November 2022, a few months before he lost his life to cancer, he offered some of his thoughts on the Ransom Place project. He noted, “I think good archaeology produces a conversation…. In a place like the Near Westside, that means we have relatively well-informed scholars, residents, and collectives, who can speak to each other…. At the heart of a community project [you have] open communication…. There has to be … [a sense of] what are people going to learn, What do you hope they’ll learn.”

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Interview with Dr. Mullins led by Dr. Kryder-Reid

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